

The Man from Ogdensburg



With no heirs to keep a good man's name alive, his deeds may die untold. To date, such a fate has threatened Matt Green, perhaps the single most important yet largely undocumented person in the history of Lake Tahoe. In fact, Green's legacy has been so thoroughly overlooked that when I described the above-pictured piece of lumber with its crayon inscription to two paid staff members of the local historical society, all they could say was, "Who's Matt Green?"

Congenitally unable to let this question go unanswered, I have pursued a better understanding of Mr. Green for several years, and am finally ready to make my report.

The story of Matt Green's rise from nail pounder during the Tahoe Tavern's construction to owner of the same hotel three decades later has often been told, but very little from the years prior to his arrival at Tahoe, or how he parlayed his laborer status into a comfortable fortune, has come to light.

Edward B. Scott, author of the 1957 landmark history *The Saga of Lake Tahoe*, interviewed Green in preparation for his book, but the retired contractor and hotel man, then in his early 80s, appears there as a source of information rather than as a doer of deeds, for some of Green's deeds were then still properly in the realm of current events rather than history.

What we do learn from Scott is that in the interim between Green's participation in construction of the Tahoe Tavern and his outright ownership of it, he built the Tahoe Vista Hotel, Vikingsholm and the John S. Drum estate in Meeks Bay. But wouldn't a busy Contractor have had many more feathers in his cap after a career spanning half a century? What else had he done to earn such a legendary reputation?

With no heirs there are no family albums, and so it is only by luck that an image of our subject survives. We will have a look at a portion of it now, for the sake of a mental image the reader can carry in the pages ahead. Green's placid countenance in retirement suggests a gentle and kindly man at peace with himself and the world. But like the Mona Lisa, his smile was enigmatic, concealing more than it revealed.

Who was this soft-spoken man without a past? He was known by all and amiable toward all and yet he was a private man, disinclined to share a confidence. From his earliest days at Tahoe, his financial involvements were far-flung, and they kept him on the move from one project to the next. What drove him to succeed, and what circumstances helped make his success possible?

Matt Green (no middle name ever discovered) was born February 25, 1873 in Ogdensburg, New York, an important port on the St. Lawrence River. Matt was the only son and middle child of Mary Service Green, a 32-year old native of Pennsylvania, and James Green, 43, who gave his occupation in the 1880 Census as a Manufacturer of flour, fuel and lumber.

By the time Matt was six, the Green family had moved to the hamlet of Cayuta, southwest of Ithaca, where a young boy might have felt some disappointment at leaving the bustle of a major river town. Matt possessed an observant and progressive nature, and could see that Cayuta would never be the geographical center of his universe. Thus his insignificant adopted town, which had been losing population since before 1860, lost one more of its best and brightest as he departed for greener pastures.

We can't speak with certainty of the nature or location of Green's early work experience. With no heirs there are no family legends passed along of great-great-grandfathers "gone to California before you were born." New York City would have been a natural initial destination for an upstate youngster, and there is indeed a Matt Green listed in the 1895 Brooklyn, NY City Directory, employed as a Borough policeman, but he is probably not our Matt. In any event, as the old century drew to a close Green found himself still searching for a vocation that suited his talents, the foremost among them yet to be revealed.

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Horace Greeley's admonition to go west was still alive and well when in 1901 the call went out for workers to build Tahoe Tavern, Duane L. Bliss's grand Sierra hotel at Lake Tahoe. Green would have been 28 years old at the time, and probably did not hear of the Tavern's construction prior to his arrival in the Sierra. In all likelihood it was a shortage of labor and not Green's carpentry skills that landed him his job on this project, for later descriptions of said skills by those with first-hand knowledge were not complimentary.

Nevertheless, Green managed to be among the carpenters hammering away at the new Bliss edifice in that momentous year of 1901, and by the time the job ended, he had fallen in love with the Lake.

Though Green was not the sort of personality who actively sought the limelight, very soon after his arrival in the Sierra he had managed to make himself a perpetual Person of Interest. From the date of this clipping to the year of his death, the *Truckee Republican* and both Reno papers were regularly sprinkled with brief items noting his comings and goings:

If this snippet of news fails to impress, consider that when it appeared in 1901 Green was an utter nobody in this neck of the woods, having just recently arrived from "the East" with nothing more to recommend him than his amiable smile.

By the time the Tavern opened for business, Green believed he had already grasped how he might make a living at the Lake. A tourist economy was taking the place of lumbering, and grand summer watering holes such as the Tavern, Hotel Tallac and Glenbrook Inn & Ranch were introducing well-heeled guests to the high country. He realized that the patrons of these new summer watering holes would eventually want to own their own pieces of this high-altitude paradise, and that cultivating their acquaintance would be the key to his success. As he was able, he began to acquire tracts of land along the west shore of the lake that could be subdivided and resold at a handsome profit. And when the new property owners were ready to build their summer estates, he would be their man.

In the first decade of the new century there were less than a handful of resident builders in the entire Tahoe Basin, and with no competition on the north shore to outshine him, Green began to cultivate a carefully selected crowd of well-heeled clients who spoke his praises to a wider circle. In the fullness of time, he would have it made. In the end, it wouldn't matter whether he was a good carpenter, as long as his customers were satisfied.

With the Tavern's construction concluded, Green's name does not appear in the pages of the *Truckee Republican* again until 1908. In the interim, he may have been among those who found work in the San Francisco Bay Area as a result of the Earthquake and Fire of 1906. One "J. Matthew Green," a carpenter abiding at 1931 Russell Street in Oakland, is found in the 1908 Oakland City Directory.

However, Green's summers were still reserved for Tahoe, and with no entanglements or obligations, he could answer the beckoning call and return to his beautiful Lake, where he had things very nice indeed.

For at least one summer season, Matt's life seems to have been a perfect dream, with no obligations pressing. However, in the ensuing year the tempo of Tahoe development picked up noticeably. Perhaps it was the unusually large number of guests who repaired to the high country in the season following the San Francisco calamity, who in subsequent seasons began to arrange for their own places at the Lake. Whatever the cause, the once-jolly bachelor was suddenly up to his eyeballs in work, with commitments to build half a dozen new residences that summer - perhaps more.

About this same time, the pace of Green's romantic life was also picking up. Sometime in 1909, for reasons unknown, he changed his winter residence from the Bay Area to the state capitol, and soon thereafter was making time with one Theil A. Duffee, a clerk-cum-milliner living in Sacramento with her parents and two brothers way out near 22nd and X.

Passions rose as passions will, and one day toward the end of 1910, Theil was invited to become Mrs. Green. By postponing marriage until the ripe old age of 37, Matt had given a good impression of confirmed bachelorhood, and so Theil's nuptial news might well have prompted comments by her friends and neighbors that she had lassoed herself quite a catch, shaking up the pecking order of Tahoe City "Society" in the process.

Theil Angeline Duffee Green was the middle child and only daughter of Pennsylvanian Edward Bird Duffee and his California-born wife Tessa Ardena Doane Duffee. Theil was 14 years younger than her new husband, and at the time of their marriage she had been living in her parents' Sacramento household, along with her brothers Raymond and Joe. Neighborly speculation was soon confirmed. At the tender age of 23 Theil was indeed well along the road to becoming one of the female community's prime movers and shakers.

At the time of Matt and Theil's marriage, her younger brother Raymond was still in school and older brother Joseph James "Joe" Duffee, two years her senior, was working as a Tinner in the Southern Pacific Railroad shops in Sacramento. Whether it was Green who later steered Joe toward the plumbing trade we will never know, but by 1924 he had become a plumber, and for years thereafter any construction work undertaken by Green generated some work for his brother-in-law.

Returning to the summer of 1910, just prior to the Green-Duffee union, we find Matt involved in several significant commercial projects, including a casino in Homewood for Arthur and Annie Jost and a hotel in Tahoe Vista for Morris Brooks and C.W. Paine, DBA the Tahoe Development Company.

In the early 20th century, adding to the difficulty of building at Tahoe were the short building season and the remote locations of most of the projects. Lumber was plentiful within the Basin, but the only practical way of getting it and other materials from the mill to the jobsite was on a barge towed behind a boat.

Thelma Saunders, whose father C.E.V. "Pegleg" Saunders contracted with Green to build him a house at the top of Trout Street in Homewood that summer of 1910, recalled the method of getting the materials to the job. The first leg of the trip involved loading a barge in Tahoe City and towing the materials behind Green's tug to the shore at the bottom of Trout Street. The final leg of the trip was overland, via Green's own two horsepower short-line "railroad":

"It was just a little narrow rail – the rail wasn't any bigger than that – and a little flatcar. There's a break in the trees going down over there, where they never have really come up as much as the ones around them. And that's where it was. It just went right straight down to what is now Highway 89. And the horses went downhill while the lumber went up. Two great big Percheron horses. Had one of their old horseshoes over the old doorway. We found it years later."

Lack of manpower was another serious problem for the backwoods Contractor, and when workers could be found, providing them with three squares a day and a roof over their heads in the middle of nowhere represented an additional challenge. Tahoe City resident Barbara Howrigan Spitsen, whose father Joe Howrigan was among Green's trusted employees, recalled the nature of room and board for Green's crew during construction of an estate at Meeks Bay for San Francisco Capitalist John S. Drum:

"The very first time we came (to Tahoe) was when Matt Green was building the Drum Estate. About 1923, I think it was, and we stayed down there and lived in the tent houses. They weren't tents on the ground. They had platforms and sides up to elbow-height. And there would be three in a cluster, and there would be a bedroom and a kitchen – or two bedrooms, I guess. Carlo and Reynaldo Vanni and their father worked for Matt Green, and Rose and Chris Boyiarides, who later worked for the Tavern, were running the cookhouse at that time out there. In those days, there was no place for your men to live."

Onsite crew camps such as the one Spitsen described had to be provided in duplicate when multiple projects were underway simultaneously. And in that summer of 1910 Green was experiencing the mixed blessings of “plenty of work.” In advance of his marriage to Theil, Matt disposed of a residence he had managed to acquire south of the Tahoe Tavern.

x (1910-10-15 *Truckee Republican* item re sale of home)

Green’s original intention had been to construct a large commercial building on this “adjoining property” for the storage of boats, but when his near neighbors learned of his plans, quick action on the part of Valentine McClatchy (and perhaps others) led to the discovery of a other real estate that would prove a suitable alternative to all parties. Here’s how McClatchy’s daughter, Phoebe Conley, remembered it in a 1988 interview:

“Matt Green was a famous contractor. Did you know about him? As a matter of fact, Matt Green at one time bought the adjoining lot here, and he built a big shed and he was going to have a boat-building place here, right next to us. And that was a terrible thing for us.

So my father, at great expense and misery, bought a large property beyond Tahoe City, which they call Lake Forest now, and he moved Matt Green out of here and put him over there, for his boat building. And my father never got anything out of it – out of his generous effort. But it saved us, anyway, from the boatyard.

Well, Matt was not a builder of boats, but he was going to be. Or he was going to have a shed – a deal, maybe, to store boats. But no, he had a factory. There was a tremendous concrete thing that you put a roller on and you haul things up. He was going to haul the boats up into the big shed. Concrete bases – a warehouse, that’s what it was. He wasn’t a boat builder, but he dealt in businesses with boats and everything. He did, and he built everything we needed here. And his wife had a brother named Duffee, and Joe Duffee was the plumber. They were relatives. Joe Duffee was our plumber. He was a great friend, and so was Matt.”

Mrs. Conley must be forgiven for her lack of clarity about what Green had, for during this period of his life his fortunes seemed to ebb and flow at the whim of Mother Nature. He had wasted no time in developing his new north shore property, just east of the old Wood Wharf, where the Bliss Steamers took on the cordwood they used for fuel. The Steamer TAHOE had been converted to an oil-burner in 1909, much reducing the use of the pier, and by the fall of 1910 the new presence of note in Lake Forest was Matt Green. He had just completed a large commercial building on the lakeshore in which to store the lake’s growing fleet of boats, and it was full. Maybe now he and Theil would spend an uninterrupted winter together?

Such was not the case. The winter of 1910-1911 delivered one of the greatest snow totals of the new century. A snowfall of 550 inches on Donner Summit meant catastrophe for many central Sierra buildings, including one in Lake Forest. These chronological clippings summarize the events that caused Green to rethink his short-term plans.